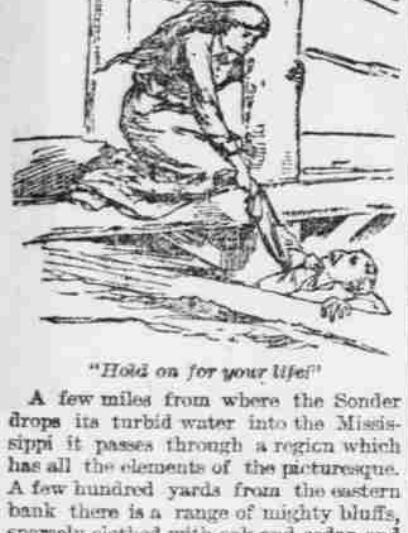
Wichita Eagle

BY THE SONDER.

By JOSEPHINE BOWEN.

CHAPTER I.



"Hold on for your life!"

A few miles from where the Sonder drops its turbid water into the Mississippi it passes through a region which has all the elements of the picturesque. A few hundred yards from the eastern bank there is a range of mighty bluffs, sparsely clothed with oak and cedar, and cleft in one place where a road winds down from the highlands beyond to cross a bridge, rustic enough, but heavy and strong to withstand the spring freshets.

A quarter of a mile above the bridge a dam has been built to turn the water into the wheels of an old mill which, lazily turning, grinds out its dole of flour and yellow meal.

On this bank of the river are also scattered a few humble dwellings, each with its garden patch, and in the summer its dooryard filled with hollyhocks, enormous sunflowers and an undergrowth of annals which grow with riotous luxuriance in the rich black soil.

On the western bank there is a stretch of bottom land two miles wide, held by nature as a private park. Here are gently swelling mounds with just enough trees, bright little ponds fringed with purple iris, and glades so blue with wild violets in their season that they look like a piece of the sky.

It is in late summer and autumn, however, that the scene is at its best, for then cardinal flowers, lobelia, wild asters, goldenrod and many other splendid blossoms make a mosaic of color that would delight the soul of an artist, if one could ever be found willing to face mosquitoes and malaria long enough to transfer a hint of its beauty to his canvas; for nature is jealous of her choicest possessions, and places an angel with a flaming sword at the gate of all earthly edens.

Every spring at the breaking up of the ice there is a rise, as the natives call it, and for two or three weeks this valley is submerged; then the water subsides, leaving an alluvial deposit rich as that on the banks of the Nile, and on it is held a carnival of flowers, malaria fever and death.

On a wild March night when the flood was at its height a woman came down the road and stood upon the bridge. The moon was full, and although stormy clouds were scurrying across the sky she shone out now and then and lighted up the weird scene and the face of the figure leaning upon the rail of the bridge and looking down at the rushing flood.

This is what the moon saw and heard. A girl of 20 years, perhaps, with a noble, womanly form and a face not pretty with any mere sensual beauty of color and dimples and curves, but one which seemed to have had a too early acquaintance with the hard problem of life—and yet a beautiful face, with its broad, white forehead, dark, level brows and sensitive mouth.

A large gray shawl was thrown over her head and wrapped about her form, and she seemed to be otherwise comfortably clad in plain dark garments.

"I should not mind being down there," she was saying to herself, "although I haven't the least notion of jumping in. There isn't much to live for. Ever since I can remember it has been just the same—the long cold winters going to that mean little school through the snow and sitting among the rest with my feet freezing; and they disgust me so, although there is no reason why they should. I am no different from the rest, only I feel a difference. Then comes the freshet, and after that fever and ague and typhoid and hot, wretched nights with millions of mosquitoes.

"I wonder how it would feel to be among the drift? I should soon be down to the mouth of the Sonder, and there are always men and boys paddling around there in skiffs and dugouts. I suppose that they would find me and hook me out with their grappling irons.

"I shouldn't look pretty at all. When Clara Grantley died how beautiful she was in her shroud of white lace! And there were flowers on her breast and in her hands and they kept her three days. I wonder how they would dress me? That is if they got me out of the water soon enough to dress me at all. I suppose it would be just cambric, and they couldn't keep me; there is no room. When people are poor and live in two roomed cabins they have to make haste to bury their dead.

"I have no notion of jumping in, but what if I should happen to fall in, would it matter much? Poor mother! I know she would be sorry, but life has been hard for her. Perhaps she would think I was better off, and father, who always seems sad, would be sadder then; and the boys would cry a little, but they would soon forget me, and go fishing and be as happy as ever.

"When the neighbors are down with fever they want me, but when they get well they don't care for me. They say that I am proud. I believe that I am, too, and that is the worst of it. What have I to be proud of? What will become of me? I am nearly 20. All of the girls I know marry before they are as old as I am, but I would rather die than marry any one who will ever ask me.

"When I go to Orquay with mother to buy calico and muslins and jeans I feel so poorly dressed and awkward. Why was I born?"

She looked far out over the swirling, rushing flood. There were strange shapes among the drift white logs which looked like dead bodies; blackened stumps with gnarled and twisted roots bearing the semblance of hideous monsters; masses of foam spread out like ghostly wings, and a branch of sycamore like a great white arm beckoning to her. There were noises too. The dam was lost, but there was a sullen roar of water, a grinding of the drift and a heavy crash as some tree torn from its place flung itself, as might a despairing soul, into the angry flood.

"Why was I born?" Oh, lonely girl! millions have asked that question. Millions will ask it again. To some life brings an answer, to many there comes no reply. Fate has lips as silent as those of Memnon until the day breaks, the sun arises and over the sands of life's desert is heard the immortal song.

She turned to retrace her steps. It was a favorite haunt of hers, this bridge. Being within calling distance from the house it was safe, and it was a habit of hers to get away from the chattering of her young brothers to indulge in melancholy thoughts.

"No, I will never drown myself; I will try to do right whatever comes; I will be patient," she said, and turned to take a last look. "The water will commence falling by morning. My God! what is that?"

"Help! help! for Christ's sake!" From a mass of drift rushing swiftly down came those words, in a faint, strangled voice.

"Here is help!" called the strong young voice of the girl. "I see you; you are coming straight under a bridge. Do you hear?"

"I—hear; my—strength—is—gone."

"You are almost to the bridge. Let go the log and catch hold of this shawl!" and snatching it from her she lay down and dropped a corner of it to the water, winding the opposite one firmly around her strong hands.

A moment more it was caught, almost dragging her from her position, but with superhuman effort she nerved herself for the struggle.

"Hold on for your life!" she said, as she drew the shawl up. Her arms were almost wrenched from their sockets, but she pulled steadily until she felt a pair of death cold hands clutch hers.

"Now," she said, "help a little yourself or I can't save you. Put your foot against that brace near you. Now!" and with an effort which almost parted body and soul she raised herself, drawing the exhausted man upward until she could place her arms beneath his, and so drag him up to the floor of the bridge, where he fell, whether alive or dead it was impossible to say.

Nor was Janie Burton in much better plight, as she was so overcome by exhaustion and excitement as to be unable for a few minutes to do more than draw panting, convulsive breaths. Then realizing the necessity of immediate action she raised her voice in a long, piteous, penetrating call for help.

It was heard, for the nearest cabin was her home, and soon the swift feet of boys told that help was at hand.

When her brothers arrived the rescued man had so far recovered as to be able to raise himself to a sitting posture, and Janie was already on her feet.

"Boys," she said, "each of you take an arm; you will have to bear his weight as well as you can. Oh, here is mother. We must get him to the house. I hope there is a good fire."

"Yes," said Mrs. Burton, "there is and some brandy, only a little, but it will help."

They got him to the house. How they could scarcely tell, for he was almost helpless; but when he came to the fire on the hearth and had swallowed a little spirits he revived sufficiently to explain that he had been looking at some timber land, and riding too near the bank it had caved off with him. He was thrown from his horse, which he supposed was drowned. He could not swim and so caught a log and drifted. It was 4 o'clock when he fell in. Here he was seized with convulsive shudderings and could say no more.

"Make some strong coffee and bring it very hot, while I help the boys change his clothes. Bring your father's best shirt and flannels. He has got an awful chill."

Janie brought the clothes and then went into the only other room beside the attic and made the coffee. By the time it was ready the patient in dry clothing had been helped into bed—a bed wonderfully clean and soft, such as may sometimes be found in lowly homes, even on the Sonder.

There was no sleep at the Burtons' that night. To boys of 12 and 14 this rescue of a man from the river was an incident too wonderful to go to sleep on. In their exultation they were the heroes of the night, Janie's part being overlooked. How they would triumph over the other boys, boys who had never so much as saved a dog in their lives. Then at the first peep of day they were to go for the doctor up the bluffs and five miles out to Oak Hill, the most beautiful country home in all the region. What a glorious run it would be, and they would tell the Stacy boys as they passed their house about the wonderful rescue. Who could sleep under such unprecedented circumstances?

As for Janie and her mother, they had enough to do. Their patient alternated between terrible rigors and flashes of burning fever and toward morning became delirious. This, however, did not alarm them as much as might be supposed, so accustomed were they to the sight of fever victims. They did what they were accustomed to do in cases of malarial fever and waited.

In the meantime, the boys were drying the clothing which had been taken from the nearly drowned man. They found in one of the pockets a few soaked bank bills and a small knife. Of papers or memoranda there were none. The bills Mrs. Burton dried and put away, saying they would do to pay the doctor.

"Who do you suppose he is, Janie?" she asked, as they sat by the fire, the boys having been banished to the kitchen.

"Some one from Orquay, I suppose," answered Janie; "I never saw any one like him. How white and beautiful he looks. I should think that the angels might look like that."

"Hush, Janie," said her mother. "I believe you are feverish yourself. Go and lie down; I will watch him."

"No," she replied. "I got him out and I am going to watch him and save him. I wanted something to make me quit thinking about myself, and unless he gets well too soon I shall have him to think about for awhile anyway."

"Only don't go to thinking too much about him, Janie. See what fine clothes he has and such white hands."

"Don't worry, mother; almost anything is better than such thoughts as I was having when he called for help." These confidences were exchanged in low tones by the fire while the patient was fitfully slumbering at daybreak.

The boys had departed on their errand and in an incredibly short time the doctor alighted from his buggy at the rude gate and came in. Pausing only for a courteous greeting he hurried to the bedside and examined his patient. He then went and stood by the hearth, looking thoughtfully into the fire. A grave man beyond his youth, but still on the sunny side of life, with a fine intellectual face, sympathetic eyes and lips; one to trust instinctively, the model physician.

"I fear, Mrs. Burton," he said at length, in a voice which exactly suited his face, "that this is a very serious case. The man is badly bruised from having been knocked about among the logs. You see, the boys told me. I asked them a few questions. It was a wonderful escape from death. But he may die yet. He is not very strong naturally, and he must have been in that icy water a long time. Has he no papers, nothing to show who he is? He is past telling now, and may remain so for some time."

"There were some bills in his pockets and a little knife, nothing more."

"Use the money as far as it will go. Let the boys go to Orquay and get some brandy. I will furnish the medicine, as I am in the habit of doing. This is hard on you and your daughter, very hard, but it would be certain death to attempt his removal. I cannot relieve you of the care, but I can of any anxiety in regard to expenses. I will take that responsibility myself, and I will send you some help in nursing."

Janie had been standing at the corner of the fireplace silent and attentive, with pale face and compressed lips. "Doctor," she said at last, "I am going to take care of him until he gets well or dies. I shall watch him day and night, and I want no help."

"Miss Benton," replied the doctor gravely, "you risked your life last night to save a human being. It was a noble thing to do. The occasion called for heroic action and you were equal to it, but don't throw away your life or your health unnecessarily; there would be nothing praiseworthy in that."

"I shouldn't do it for praise; I am tired of thinking about myself and hating the people on the Sonder," she answered impetuously. "I am glad that I have this man to take care of. I want to work hard and he is not like the rest."

"By 'the rest' I suppose you mean these poor neighbors of ours among the bluffs. What have they done, I wonder, to deserve your hatred? I think I have seen you holding their babies in your arms when they were nearly dead with fever; I think I have seen you nursing and caring for my patients when I trembled for your own safety. Do you hate those whom you help to save from death? I do not," he added with a smile.

"They hate me," she answered bitterly.

"You are mistaken. They fail to understand you. They feel that although you are in one sense one of themselves you live apart from them in thought and feeling. Do you expect gratitude when you sacrifice your comfort and endanger your health for them? I have been a physician for fifteen years, Miss Burton, and I have found but few cases of gratitude. My patients are often too poor to pay me, but they generally regard themselves as the injured parties in the transaction and are seldom grateful; indeed, I might say with you that they hate me, but yet I love my work. Success is my greatest reward. I love to save life, and so do you.

"In regard to our patient here, I can understand why it is more pleasant for you to care for him. He is very handsome, and as you saved his life you have a right to feel a great interest in him."

"I wonder if he lives in Orquay?" said Janie.

"No," replied the doctor decidedly, "he would be as much out of place in Orquay as on the Sonder. Doubtless he will be inquired after and found. In the meantime we must take as good care of him as we can. But be careful of your own health and strength, Miss Burton, and remember that the rich and handsome can be ungrateful as well as the poor and homely."

Day after day passed, with no change in the patient save a gradual sinking.

At first a few neighbors, curious to see the man saved out of the river by "that proud Janie Burton," came and offered to help, but they looked so ague stricken and woebegone, so obviously in need of help themselves that Mrs. Burton, at Janie's entreaty, sent them away with thanks, saying that they could do all there was to be done. As to Janie, the tides of life were running high with her. She seemed incapable of fatigue, and the doctor on his daily visits looked upon her with wonder. Instead of weariness there was buoyancy. Her face had lost its pallor, and was blooming as if she had partaken some fabled elixir of life.

As he watched her hovering over the still unconscious man, with that grand maternal look in her face so characteristic of all truly noble women when caring for the helpless or suffering, he experienced a pang of anguish when he thought what the awakening and reaction might be.

"He had better die," was the thought of the physician, "than to live to break the heart of such a woman, as I feel that he will. And yet he must not die if I can save him. He must be restored. Yet she will die unless he returns her love. A woman is a strange creature anyway. Think of her loving this man who has never been able to recognize her, whose name she doesn't know, who may even have a wife! It is past belief. By his bedside she is transformed. If he regains consciousness, as I think he will, he will see her at her best. God grant he may not blight such a flower."

Still the days went on, and there was no change. On Sundays an elderly, hard working man came and sat awhile by the bed and then went away. He was the husband and father, who was at home no other day.

The boys fished, brought home and milked the cow, cut wood and did other chores about the place. The mother attended to her housework, and at night watched for three hours while Janie slept, and every day the doctor came. It was not his busiest season, and he could spend an hour or two daily by the bedside of his still unknown patient, for no inquiries had been made about him, although the story of the rescue had found its way into the columns of The Orquay News. Nor had he in his delirium given a history of his life good or bad.

It is only in fiction that connected stories are told in the ravings of fever. In reality the labored breathing, the sharp cry, the heart breaking moan and unuttered meaningless words, tell no story of the past—only one of present suffering and a terrible battle with the king of terrors on the sands of a shadowy sea.

So these three, mother, daughter and physician, watched the stranger as he went down, down to the river of death.

At length there came a day when there was a slight change in the daily routine.

As soon as the doctor had looked at his patient he asked that the boys might take care of his horse.

"I shall stay today and to-night," he said. "By midnight we shall know the worst or the best, whichever it may be."

He looked at Janie. "Love is immortal in her eyes," he thought. "She doesn't believe that he can die, but it will be far better for her if he does. She will always believe then that her love would have been returned, and if no one claims him she can have his grave to love and devote her life to planting flowers on it—but I think he will live, and what then? Well, we shall see."

As midnight approached a deep silence fell upon the three watchers. The doctor sat with his fingers on the pulse of his patient. Janie stood near him with a look of awe on her face, but with no fear. Her mother sat near the foot of the bed, her head resting upon her hands, waiting. Suddenly there was a slight movement; the doctor arose, laid the sick man's hand across his breast, slightly changed the position of his head, drew the covers up over his shoulders, then turned to Janie and said: "Go up to bed now and sleep until morning."

"Is he dead?" she asked, with white lips.

"No, he is asleep. His sleep his natural, his skin is moist. When he wakes he will be conscious, but very weak. I will watch until then, and it may be several hours. The few moments after he awakens will be critical ones. I want to be by him then. Can you sleep? If not I will give you something to make you sleep. You must rest."

"Oh, not to-night! Please let me stay. I don't care if I die to-morrow. Let me stay here to-night."

"Very well. I have no right to command you. You have not employed me as your physician, but as your friend; if you will consider me such I will say you are unreasonable, but that is a woman's privilege."

Mrs. Burton, when she knew that the crisis was passed, retired to the attic to rest and sleep. The doctor drew his chair to the hearth, stirred up the smoldering fire and laid on fresh wood.

Janie had disappeared, but soon returned with delicious coffee, cream toast and cold chicken, which she placed on a stand, and drawing it up in front of the fire requested the doctor to eat, while she took her position by the bed.

"I am going to be obstinate as well as you," he said; "I will not touch your nice lunch unless you eat with me. Come!"

He drew a chair opposite his own, and she came and sat down.

"How good this coffee smells!" he said. "I have found out the secret of your family's health in the midst of all this malaria. Your mother knows how to feed her children and how to keep everything pure. She is one of those who could make the stable in Bethlehem a fitting place for the advent of the King. If your mother and you should start out and convert all the people on the Sonder to your way of living I should have to move away."

Janie sipped her coffee with her eyes fixed upon the glowing fire and made no response to the doctor's kindly praises.

"How long will it be," she asked at length, "before he can talk—before he will be well?"

"He will talk a little to-morrow, or rather today, when he wakes, but he must not be questioned or worried. I need not tell you that, however. What a born nurse you are! This man, whoever he is, owes his life to you twice over. A month of such devotion! How have you kept up? It is the most wonderful thing that I ever knew."

"I am strong," she replied; "I haven't felt tired, but it will soon be over, the weather will be hot and there will be fever all along the Sonder, and the days will be so long."

There was an infinite pathos in her voice and words that shook the firmness of the man opposite her. His voice trembled in spite of his self control as he replied: "Hope for the best, Miss Janie. Try to think everything will be as you desire. From my heart I hope that no disappointment awaits you, but should it be otherwise be courageous. You are young, with a grand capacity for happiness and usefulness. Time is the great healer and consoler.

"There is no trouble, however unendurable it may seem, that cannot be lived through by a brave soul. If we lose the one great joy of our lives we will find that much is left worth living for. I have seen you walking on the bluffs in the early morning, breathing the purer air and gaining health for your body; remember there are moral heights to be climbed and health to be gained for the soul as well. Will you promise me to try to be a brave girl, whatever course events may take, during the next few weeks?"

"Yes, I will try," she said, and burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER II.

"Give her the life that she saved."

"How am I to reward her, Dr. Selwyn? That is what puzzles me." And the patient, Harry Forrester, leaned back in the comfortable chair which had been provided for him, and looked up with an expression of real anxiety on his face.

"She has saved your life twice—once at the eminent risk of her own and again by her devoted nursing. You are the one to place an estimate on the value of such service."

The two men were alone. Janie had gone for a walk on the bluffs and Mrs. Burton had borrowed a neighbor's wagon, and with the boys had gone to Orquay for household supplies.

Ten days of convalescence had done wonders for the stranger; he was now out of danger and rapidly recovering.

"It was a wonderful thing for a girl to do, that is a fact," he resumed. "I was about gone. I remember her hands—how they held on to mine. I don't remember anything else until I awoke and saw you leaning over me."

"I have not mentioned it before," said the doctor, "but I have wondered why you were not missed and searched after."

"Oh, that isn't strange at all. I often strike out for a trip, and I seldom write to the governor unless I have business. I have no mother to worry about me. As I told you, I was thinking of investing a few thousands in timber lands, and was looking through here when this happened. A mighty close call, I can tell you, and then to be rescued by a girl. A nice job it is, I must say! But how am I to reward her? I want you to help me with your advice. I have been studying it over ever since I could think at all. Of course I am going to do the fair thing—give her mother a lot of money if she will have it, and all that, but what must I give the girl?"

"Give her the life that she saved. Give her your heart—if you have one."

"Oh, by Jove, doctor, that is going it too strong. I don't say that I couldn't love the girl, and if I lived in these woods it would be all right. But to take her to St. Louis and introduce her into my set, I couldn't, you know, and then her family! Oh, no—ask me to do something easy."

"As easy, for instance, as for a girl to pull you out of the clutches of death and nurse you back to life and strength."

"I say I will do anything in reason. In a novel of course I should fall in love and marry her regardless of conventionalities. But I will make a confession to you, doctor. Two days before I fell into that cursed creek I was at a ball, and I met my divinity there—a little angel in rose colored tulle—and I waltzed with her all night. Do you know, while I was lying here with this fever I was waltzing with her, by Jove—waltzing over red hot sand—dying with thirst—and she seemed to be a living coal of fire; her rose colored dress was flame, and when I thought I was burning to a coal myself an angel would come and cool the awful heat and give me water. The angel was Janie Burton. I know that now."

"Young man," said the doctor, solemnly, "I wish to God you had drowned before you reached the bridge that night. You are not worth the sacrifice of her life."

"Thanks, awfully, for the compliment; but it occurs to me that she is yet alive and well; and something else occurs to me, by the way. You talk as if you loved her yourself. You are a bachelor; what stands in the way?"

"Be careful, sir, how you speak. A man wants the love of the woman whom he marries. She has unfortunately bestowed hers elsewhere. I shall never marry. I have had a long struggle with adverse circumstances, and now I have established a mission among these hills. I mean to devote my life to the fever stricken settlers along the Sonder."

"Not a very brilliant prospect, I should say," drawled Forrester.

"No, but more satisfying to me than life in what you call society."

"You have had experience, of course. One can see that you are a cultured man."

"Yes, I have eaten of the tree of knowledge, and to me the fruit tasted of death. But no matter for that. I am going to speak to you as one man to another. Jane Burton is a noble and beautiful girl. Her parents are New England people, poor, it is true, but with a certain refinement and fair education. You can tell that by the speech of the family. Their language is as good as yours or mine. She has grown up here among these rude settlers like a lily among thorns. A lily is no purer, a wild rose is no sweeter, an angel is no stronger or more helpful.

"She has never loved, having seen no one to love until she dragged a handsome ingrate out of the hands of death. God pity her if she has warmed a frozen scorpion to life in her bosom. You admit that you could love her if she were in your 'set.' Such love would be an insult to a woman like her. You are incapable of any love with her acceptance. But I will waste no more words on you. You must not stay here any longer. You are able to be taken to my house, and I will take you there to-morrow. In the meantime give Mrs. Burton a check for her trouble and the expense she has incurred on your account, but don't insult her daughter by offering her a present."

So saying Dr. Selwyn strode out of the house and drove away with a look of wrath on his face and a bitterness in his heart beyond anything he had ever known in all his troubled life.

After the departure of Dr. Selwyn Harry Forrester fell into a study of the situation. He was not without a feeling of gratitude, but his nature was shallow, his emotions, if he could be said to have any, were but a ripple on the surface. The power of an absorbing passion was something of which he had no comprehension. A good waltzer with a doll face and a blonde head was his ideal of womanhood; such an one he meant to place at the head of his grand new house in St. Louis. But now he was in an awkward fix. Here was a fine young woman in love with him—a fact which would have added to his self complacency only for the little circumstance that he owed his life to her, and that Dr. Selwyn, who was certainly a very fine man, seemed to think that he, Harry Forrester, was acting the scoundrel.

Here he began to revolve in his mind the subject of a reward.

"Confound Selwyn's pride!" he said to himself. "I know girls—there are thousands of things that they want, and I am going to find out what she would like."

His reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Janie herself, with her hands full of early wildflowers, which she laid on a stand at his side.

"How well you look!" he exclaimed half enviously. "Do you know, Miss Janie, the doctor says that I have troubled you long enough, and he means to take me away to his house to-morrow."

Janie stood as if turned to marble, while the color slowly drifted out of her face.

Harry Forrester looked up, expecting a reply, and was struck with pity at her expression.

"Do sit down," he said, "and let us talk a little." He reached for a chair and she dropped into it.

"Are you sorry to be rid of your troublesome charge, Miss Janie?"

"Yes," she said. "My life has been so different of late; but it is all over now, and there will never be any change again."

"Oh, don't think that; I am sure I hope that you will be very happy."

Her eyes were downcast, and as he looked at her he was for the first time struck by the statuesque beauty of her face and form, and he began to wonder if after all she were not the disguised princess of some fairy story. His thoughts found expression: "I hope you will pardon me, Miss Janie, but haven't you seen better days?"

"No," she answered, "I never saw any better days than these, and I never shall see any better. There is no romance about me, Mr. Forrester, I am not even a foundling. My father is a machinist and works in Orquay. We live out here because it is cheaper. We own this little place, and the boys run wild in the woods except when there is a school."

"You have a school then?" he asked, at a loss what to say.

"Oh, yes; two miles over the bluffs there is a schoolhouse and a sort of school, three months in winter and three in summer; I am going to teach it this summer—one doesn't need to know much to teach it."

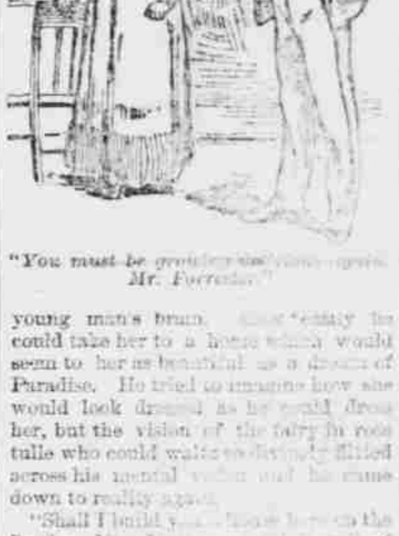
"But shouldn't you like to go to a college or something? You see, Miss Janie, I owe you a great debt; you saved my life, you know."

"Of course," she answered, "and if it had been my little Scotch terrier I would have jumped right in rather than have had him drown. I could have caught on to the braces of the bridge and climbed out easy enough. Of course it was a hard pull, you were so heavy and nearly frozen, but it is nothing to make a fuss about. As to nursing you, it might as well be you as anyone else. Some of the neighbors are always sick, and I am always well, and I take care of them a good deal. It keeps me from thinking about myself."

"But why shouldn't you think about yourself? You could not think of anything else half as lovely."

"I would rather think about any one else," she answered, without betraying by look or smile that she noticed his bit of flattery. "I am not very happy—perhaps I should like to have a house like Mr. Grantley's up on the bluffs. I mean that I should like for father and mother to have one. They have pretty carpets on all the floors, and so many pictures, and books, and lace curtains as fine as spider webs, and a piano. Then the girls have beautiful dresses, and a great garden full of flowers, and so many pets. You see, Mr. Grantley owns nearly all the country around here."

As she spoke thought was busy in the



"You must be growing delirious again, Mr. Forrester."

young man's brain. Certainly he could take her to a house which would seem to her as beautiful as a dream of Paradise. He tried to imagine how she would look dressed as he would dress her, but the vision of the fairy in rose tulle who could waltz so divinely flitted across his mental vision and he came down to reality again.

"Shall I build you a house here on the Sonder, Miss Janie, and fill it full of pretty things?"

"You!" she exclaimed, with a quick change to the aspect of an insulted queen. "You build me a house! You must be growing delirious again, Mr. Forrester."

"I tell you I want to reward you for saving my life, and you look as if I wanted to murder you," he replied.

"I have told you that I did nothing for you that I wouldn't have done for a decent dog. I wanted something to do, and I think God sent me work. I hope he will send me more, although I want no one to suffer; yet if there must be work like that to do I want to do it, or I can't live."

Harry Forrester resorted to man's usual refuge and declared to himself that "women were strange beings and he couldn't understand them." Certainly this one was not so ready to accept rewards or to drop into his arms as he supposed. But to leave her now was growing difficult. His interest was aroused.

"I will not talk of a reward then, since you resent it so, but may I come and see you next October? I should like to hunt these woods, and I shall want to see the girl who saved my life."

"Oh, yes," she answered, with an entrancing smile, "I shall be very glad to see you; the woods are beautiful then."

The next day Dr. Selwyn came to take his patient away. "We have troubled you a great deal, Miss Janie," he said, "but now you can rest; we shall not disturb you for a long time." How he pitied her as he glanced at her pale face and quivering lips. If he could only bear this trouble for her! But the kindest thing was to get the parting over and this was soon accomplished.

"Out of sight" was not "out of mind," however, with Harry Forrester. He began to be conscious of an interest in Janie Burton quite equal to that which he felt for the waltzer, and the more he thought of the matter the more puzzled he was to know which to swear allegiance to—the girl who had flirted with him for a night and forgotten his existence the next day, or the one who had reached strong, helpful hands down to the river of death and lifted him up as the angel of the resurrection may do when the trumpet sounds.

Two weeks under the care of Dr. Selwyn's good housekeeper and her husband restored Harry Forrester to perfect health.

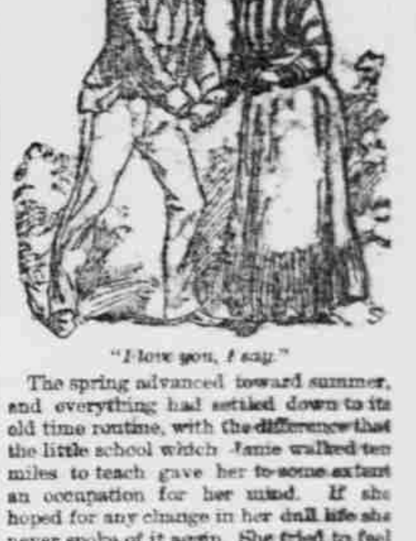
"Doctor," said he, on the evening before the day fixed for his departure, "I shall not see Miss Burton before I leave, but I will tell you what I mean to do. If I can convince myself that it is the right thing I am coming back here next October to marry her, or to offer myself to her, which, of course, is the same thing, that is, if I don't change my mind. The fact is, I disobeyed you and tried to get her to take something else, but she nearly extinguished me with her scorn; so, if this lamb must be sacrificed, he must, and there is an end of it. After all, I think she will make a sensation. There isn't a woman of her type in our set."

"I should think not," replied the doctor, savagely.

"Of course she will feel awkward among society women," continued Forrester, fatuously.

"I have no doubt of it. The Madonna would feel awkward at a progressive euchre party or a high tea, but motherhood is worshiped in her name just the same. Let me tell you, Forrester, if you are so fortunate as to win Janie Burton you will have a wife, your children will have a mother, and your home will have a priestess to keep the sacred fires burning on its altars. Try to realize this, and try to appreciate the blessing that a kind fate has in store for you."

CHAPTER III.



"I love you, I say."

The spring advanced toward summer, and everything had settled down to its old time routine, with the difference that the little school which Janie walked ten miles to teach gave her to some extent an occupation for her mind. If she hoped for any change in her dull life she never spoke of it again. She tried to feel an interest in her pupils; she tried not to feel bitter toward the parents who would send them to school dirty and unkempt, and with a lunch of soda biscuit and fried pork. She was gracious and sweet to all alike, and at home tried by smiles and cheerful words to brighten her mother's lonely life and make her father's weekly home coming one of joy.

Unconsciously to herself she was gaining the moral heights and finding the atmosphere that was good for her soul's health.

As the summer advanced and the dreaded hot days came the school closed and Janie resigned. As Janie went from house to house on errands of mercy she often saw her friend Dr. Selwyn. Once she inquired if he had heard from Mr. Forrester. He answered her almost curtly that he often heard from him, but that was all, and as he volunteered no further information she never spoke of him again.

This summer seemed to tax Janie's strength. Toward its close a languor and weariness took possession of her, but she made no complaint.

The 1st of October found her wan and listless, but more beautiful than ever. Her mother watched her with a sinking heart. There had been consumption in the family at home, on the Atlantic coast, and she was dreading the first fatal signs of the dreaded disease.

One day when Janie came in from a ramble, with her arms full of the beautiful spoils of the woods, she was met at the gate by Harry Forrester, grown strong and very handsome. He greeted her joyfully, yet tenderly, and relieving her of her lovely burden he asked her to retrace her steps with him. She consented, and they took a winding path, carpeted with fallen leaves and hedged in with all the glory of the autumn woods.

Suddenly Forrester turned and took both hands in his. "Well, Janie," he said, "I have come back to offer myself to you. If you scorn me, as you did the house I offered to build for you, I shall feel awfully cut up, for upon my honor I love you."

"I should be very sorry if that were so," she said, gently withdrawing her hands. "But I don't think you do love me," she continued, smiling brightly. "You love the girl who waltzed, and wore a rose colored dress. You talked about her all the first week of your illness."

"Oh, hang the girl who waltzed! She may go to Jericho. I love you, I say, and I want you to marry me. I will build a nice house for your father and mother and help the boys to a start in life, and, as for you, you shall be a queen, as you deserve to be. You shall be at the head of as pretty a house as there is in St. Louis and have everything you want. Then I hope nobody will call me an ingrate or a scorpion."

"No one has a right to call you that, Mr. Forrester. You are noble and generous, I am sure, and when you are married to some beautiful girl among your own friends I hope you will bring her to see me, if I am alive. Father has saved some money, and with that and what you gave mother they are going to build a pretty little house about where we are now standing, and we will have a room for you."

"But, Janie, I took time to consider and know that I love you. I do not want to marry any one but you."

"I cannot marry you, Mr. Forrester, for I do not love you."

"You do not love me!" he repeated, with a look of wonder. "Why, I thought—I really thought that you did, you know."

"Well, I do not, and never did. Nor must you mistake gratitude for love either, or imagine that you are under any obligations to me. I shall always be glad that I had strength, and was there to help you that night; the thought of it is all the reward I want. I hope you will remember me. I am not very strong. Perhaps I shall not live long. If you hear that I am gone don't feel sorry, for it will be best so."

"Now, see here," said Forrester, again taking her hands, "if you are ill you are going to the best health resort in the United States, and your mother is going, too. I swear that I will do something for you. Do you suppose that I am going to accept my life at your hands and do nothing to show that I have the feelings of a man? I will make Selwyn take care of you."

Ah! no pallor now! A rosy flush and sudden pressure of her hand to her heart told that the name was a shaft which had struck home.

A light dawned on Forrester's handsome but rather vacuous face. "Good-by," he said suddenly, "I will see you again to-morrow," and he was gone.

An hour later he burst into Dr. Selwyn's library. "Well!" he exclaimed, "I have offered myself to Janie Burton